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ABSTRACT

Four approaches to the classification of 110 students as mentally retarded were investigated. The frequency of classification of educable mentally retarded (EMR) and trainable mentally retarded (TMR) and nonretarded (NMR) Ss from three racial-ethnic groups (Anglos, Mexican Americans, and Blacks) and two socioeconomic groups (middle and low) was compared. Classification approaches included the full scale IQ approach; the psychometric approach which involves multiple criteria and multiple tests; the pluralistic approach which uses J. Mercer's Estimated Learning Potential (ELP) to adjust Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children - Revised IQ scores; and the adaptive approach which incorporates the traditional psychometric tests and the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children. Results indicated that the adaptive behavior approach classified the fewest students as mentally retarded at both levels (EMR, TMR), while also declassifying the most students as not mentally retarded. The pluralistic approach classified fewer students as EMR or TMR than the modified psychometric or traditional IQ approaches, but more students than the adaptive behavior approach. The adaptive behavior approach had the greatest impact on Mexican American and Black Ss, followed by the ELP approach. The adaptive behavior approach was most conservative in the classification of middle and low socioeconomic status Ss. (Legal and practical considerations involved in nondiscriminatory evaluation and declassification of students as retarded are addressed.) (CL)

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FOUR APPROACHES TO CLASSIFICATION OF MENTAL RETARDATION*

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FOUR APPROACHES TO CLASSIFICATION OF MENTAL RETARDATION[1]

Alan T. Fisher

The concept of nondiscriminatory multi-factor assessment, including measures of adaptive behavior, is having far reaching effects on the classification of special education students and, ultimately, the services rendered to these students. In September, 1978, national legislation commonly referred to as PL 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Act) went into full effect for students ages 3-18. As would be expected, state policies are beginning to be modified to parallel national mandates including "pluralistic assessment procedures" (California Senate Bill, 1973; Texas Education Agency Administrative Procedures, July, 1978).

One approach to developing nondiscriminatory assessment is the broadening of psychometric practices to include an assessment of adaptive behavior. Heber's definition (1961, p. 61) of adaptive behavior is frequently cited. Heber's two major factors include: 1) the degree to which the individual is able to function and maintain himself independently, and 2) the degree to which he meets satisfactorily the culturally imposed demands of personal and social responsibility. Recent research efforts have operationalized such definitions by the creation of assessment instruments for assessing behavior of children in non-school environments. Recent work of Jane Mercer and June Lewis in developing their System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) is of particular importance as this system includes not only an assessment of adaptive behavior (Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children or ABIC) but also a pluralistic assessment (i.e., an adjustment for

[1]Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, September, 1978.

"IQ" based on sociocultural norms). Research conducted by Mercer (1973; 1974) and Fisher (1977) suggests that fewer students are classified as mentally retarded when traditional psychometric evaluations include an assessment of adaptive behavior.

Another approach toward modifying traditional psychometric assessment to achieve nondiscriminatory testing is by utilization of pluralistic norms. The concept of pluralistic norms suggests that separate norms should be generated for each sociocultural group and that an individual is compared only to the sociocultural group of which he/she is a member. This concept has been operationalized by Mercer and Lewis (1973, 1977) in the development of the SOMPA system which utilizes sociocultural scales that assess family size, family structure, socioeconomic status, and degree of acculturation.

Data from these sociocultural scales is used in a multiple regression equation to estimate mean WISC-R scores for the child's particular socio-cultural group. The child's attained WISC-R scores are then compared to the means for their sociocultural group to determine their estimated learning potential (ELP). The ELP differs from a traditional IQ score in that the child is only compared with children from a similar sociocultural environment rather than with children from a general population sample. In essence, the ELP is an IQ score that is adjusted for sociocultural differences. An earlier study by Fisher (1977) indicated that fewer minority and students of lower socioeconomic status were classified as mentally retarded using the ELP as compared to traditional psychometric norms.

The present study involves four approaches to classification of students as mentally retarded. The present study compares the frequency of classification of mental retardation (EMR, TMR) and "non-retarded" students from three racial-ethnic groups and two (middle and low) socio-economic groups.

Method

Middle and low SES Anglo, Mexican-American, and Black students who were referred for three year re-evaluation and initial evaluation (N=110) were included in this study. The grade placement of these students ranged from elementary through senior high in a district of approximately 40,000 students.[1] These students were selected on the basis of the school district's existing appraisal procedures.[2] District appraisal procedures require evaluation with an adaptive behavior assessment for any student scoring two or more standard deviations below the mean of an IQ instrument. Students who appeared severely retarded were evaluated with Stanford-Binet Intelligence Tests (Terman, 1960) and the AAMD Adaptive Behavior Scale, Public School Version (Lambert, 1975).[3] The remaining 110 students were evaluated with the Wechsler Intelligence Test for Children (Wechsler, 1949), Wide Range Achievement Test (Jastak, 1965), Reading Comprehension subtest of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (Dunn, 1970), Bender Gestalt Test of Visual Motor Skills (Bender, 1946), and the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (Mercer, 1975).[4] These 110 students constitute the sample for the present study.

Of these 110 students, there were 20 Anglos, 77 Mexican-Americans, and 13 Blacks. The socioeconomic status was determined by utilizing the

sociocultural scales of the SOMPA (Mercer, 1975). This essentially reflects the occupation of the head of the household and the family's chief source of income. This SES scale ranges from a rating of 0 through 12. In the present study a score of six or below indicated low SES (N=90) and a score of seven and above indicated middle SES (N=20).

For the purpose of this study, four approaches were used to classify a student educable mentally retarded (EMR), trainable mentally retarded (TMR), or non-retarded (N-MR). The first approach, the full scale IQ approach, provides an opportunity to examine how students are classified when a full scale IQ is used as the sole criterion (i.e., an IQ two standard deviations below the mean) for classification as mentally retarded (or not retarded).

The second approach, the psychometric approach, for classifying students mentally retarded makes use of the criteria utilized by the school district psychological services department. Essentially, this approach involves multiple criteria and multiple tests (as described previously) to be used to reach a classification of retardation. These criteria are as follows:

1. Full scale IQ less than 70
2. Verbal and Performance IQs below a score of 75
3. Subtest pattern includes not more than two scale scores of 8 (or higher)
4. Achievement scale scores below 80
5. Performance on visual-motor test at least two standard deviations below the mean

To meet these criteria a student must function within the mentally retarded range on verbal, non-verbal, visual-motor and achievement tasks.

The third approach utilized for classifying students as mentally retarded is the pluralistic approach. This approach utilizes Mercer's Estimated Learning Potential (ELP) to adjust WISC-R IQ scores. The fourth approach that may lead to classification as mentally retarded is the adaptive approach, which includes the traditional psychometrics and the ABIC (Mercer, 1975). Two or three (EMR and TMR, respectively) standard deviations below the mean on all psychometrics and on the ABIC are used for determining mental retardation in the adpative approach.

Descriptive data in terms of frequency counts and percentages were calculated for 110 students representing three ethnic and two SES groups. Differences in the frequency of students classified as educable mental retarded (EMR), trainable mentally retarded (TMR), and non-mentally retarded (N-MR) were determined, using the full scale IQ approach, the psychometric approach, the ELP approach, and the adaptive approach.

Results

Classification Differences for Four Approaches

As shown in Table 1, differences in classifications of retardation and/or non-retardation do occur among the four approaches (i.e., full scale IQ, psychometric approach, ELP approach, and adaptive approach).

Table 1 about here

Mentally retarded (EMR and TMR). Table 1 reveals that the largest differences occur at the EMR classification level. The full scale IQ approach (which

involved only students with an IQ of 70 or less) leads to the greatest number of students being classified as EMR (77%). The psychometric approach reduced somewhat the number of students classified as EMR, resulting in 63% of the students being classified at this level. The estimated learning potential (ELP) method further reduced the number, resulting in only 42% of the students being classified as EMR. Finally, the adaptive behavior approach classified the fewest students at the EMR level (23%). Hence, the adaptive behavior approach resulted in the fewest number of students being classified as educable mentally retarded. An inspection of the frequency of classification at the TMR level reveals the same trend with the full scale approach classifying the most students and the adaptive behavior approach classifying the fewest number of students at the TMR level.

Non-mentally retarded (N-MR). Differences occur among the four approaches in terms of students declassified (or not considered mentally retarded) as shown in Table 2. The full scale IQ method did not result in any student

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Table 2 about here

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being declassified. The psychometric approach declassified 25% of the students, the ELP approach 43%, and the adaptive behavior approach 70%. The adaptive behavior approach resulted in the greatest number of students being declassified.

Ethnic Group Differences in Classifications

Table 3 reflects differences among the four approaches to classification for the Anglo, Mexican-American, and Blacks. The greatest amount of change occurs at the EMR level of classification for all ethnic groups.

Table 3 about here

The full scale approach resulted in the classification of approximately three-fourths of the Anglo, Mexican-American, and Black populations (75%, 78%, 77% respectively) as EMR. The psychometric approach classified significantly fewer students across each ethnic group as educable mentally retarded. Approximately one-half of the Anglos and Blacks (50% and 54% respectively) were classified EMR by the psychometric approach, while two out of three (66%) students in the Mexican-American sample were classified as EMR by the psychometric approach. In contrast, the pluralistic approach resulted in the classification of almost one-half (40%) of the Anglo sample as EMR and approximately one-half (47%) of the Mexican-American sample as EMR. The most significant impact of the ELP approach was in the Black sample as it classified only one out of four (23%) Blacks as EMR. The adaptive behavior approach to classification again proved to be the most conservative for all three ethnic groups, resulting in only 30% of the Anglos, 22% of the Mexican-Americans, and 15% of the Blacks being classified as retarded at the EMR level. Similar trends are revealed when inspecting the TMR level of classification.

The amount of "shrinkage" resulting from the four approaches for the three ethnic groups is revealed in Table 4. The full scale approach did not declassify any students. The psychometric approach declassified 35%

Table 4 about here

of the Anglos, 24% of the Mexican-American, and 31% of the Blacks, whereas the ELP approach declassified 35% of the Anglos, 39% of the Mexican-Americans, and 70% of the Black population. As can be seen, the adaptive behavior approach again resulted in the greatest amount of declassification, resulting in 60% of the Anglos, 70% of the Mexican-Americans, and 85% of the Blacks being declassified.

SES Group Differences in Classifications

Table 5 suggests that differences do occur among the four approaches according to socioeconomic status for both the EMR and TMR classifications.

Table 5 about here

Inspection of Table 5 reveals trends which have been reflected in previous tables. The greatest amount of change occurred at the EMR level of classification. The IQ approach to classification resulted in the greatest number of students being classified, particularly low SES students, at the EMR level (i.e., 65% middle SES and 80% low SES). The psychometric approach resulted in 50% of the middle SES students and 67% of the low SES students being classified at the EMR level. The ELP approach classified 45% of the middle SES and 42% of the low SES students as EMR. The adpative behavior approach was the most conservative in classification of students as EMR, especially for low SES students. The adaptive behavior approach classified 30% of the middle SES students and 21% of the low SES as EMR. Again, similar differences of small magnitude occur at the TMR level of classification.

Table 6 suggests that differences occur in the frequency of declassification for the four approaches. The psychometric approach resulted in 30% of the middle SES being declassified and 24% of the low SES.

Table 6 about here

The ELP approach resulted in 20% of the middle SES being declassified and 49% of the low SES being declassified. The adaptive behavior approach once again resulted in the greatest number of students being declassified with 55% of the middle SES being declassified and 72% of the low SES students being declassified.

Discussion

Several major trends are apparent in the data which reveals significant differences among the number of students classified as educable mentally retarded (EMR), trainable mentally retarded (TMR), and students labeled not mentally retarded (N-MR), using four approaches to classification (full scale IQ, psychometric, ELP, and Adaptive). Overall, the adaptive behavior approach classified the fewest students as mentally retarded at both levels (EMR,TMR). In addition, the adaptive behavior approach declassified the most students as not mentally retarded. The ELP approach classified fewer students as mentally retarded than the modified psychometric or traditional IQ approaches, but more students than the adaptive behavior approach. Similarly, the ELP approach declassified a significant number of students but not as many as the adaptive behavior approach. Overall, these findings are in accord with previous research (Mercer, 1973, Fisher, 1977).

The Adaptive Behavior approach appears to have the greatest impact on Mexican-American and Black students. Approximately 70%-85% of the minority students were declassified by the adaptive behavior approach. Again the estimated learning potential was effective in declassifying minority students with 40%-70% of the students being declassified by this approach. Similar trends for the adaptive behavior approach and the estimated learning potential approach are evidenced at the EMR and TMR level of classification. Neither the traditional full scale IQ approach or the modified psychometric approach proved as effective in declassification of minority students as did the adaptive behavior or estimated learning potential approaches. These results are in accord with previous research (Mercer, 1973, Fisher, 1977). Mercer reported 60%-90% shrinkage (i.e., declassification) in the classification of Mexican-American and Blacks, using an IQ of 69 or less in a 3% cut-off in adaptive behavior (1973, page 189). The data in this study supports the contention that assessment of adaptive behaviors and the use of pluralistic norms result in the non-discriminatory classification of students as mentally retarded.

Inspection of the data revealed that sizable SES differences occur among the four approaches to classification of mental retardation. The differences occur primarily at the EMR level of classification, but small differences are reflected at the TMR level also. The adaptive behavior approach is most conservative in the classification of middle and low SES students as mentally retarded, and also resulted in the greatest number of students being declassified The low SES students appear to benefit the most from the adpative behavior assessment with approximately three-fourths (72%) of low SES students being declassified. The

estimated learning potential declassified approximately half (49%) of the low SES sutdents; hence, again it appears to be an alternative for non-discriminatory testing. The present data is consistent with Mercer's previous work in which she reported a 50% shrinkage in classification of retardation related to SES (1973, page 191).

The over-representation of minority students and low SES students in MR classifications has been reported that several years (Mercer, 1971, 1975; Oakland, 1973). Data in the present study suggests that the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children is most conservative approach to the classification of mentally retardation for students of three ethnic groups and two SES classes at both the EMR and TMR level of classification. Similarly, the use of pluralistic norms (i.e., ELP) appears as another alternative which could be utilized in nondiscriminatory testing. The ELP in the present study was not as conservative in the classification of students as was the adaptive approach; however, significant impact in terms of decreasing the representation of minority and low SES students at both the EMR and TMR level of retardation was noted. Similar conclusions have been discussed by authors such as Oakland (1970). Not only do the ABIC and the ELP appear to be alternatives which can help resolve the professional issues involved in the nondiscrimintory assessment of educationally handicapped students, but they also appear to constitute a pragmatic step in responding to mandates which have come to the forefront within the last two years, relative to nondiscriminatory testing and due process requirements (P.L. 94-142, Law and Behavior, 1976).

The adaptive behavior approach and the estimated learning potential (ELP) appear to help resolve some professional and legal issues at the classi-

fication level in providing services to educationally handicapped students. However, these two approaches also generate questions to be answered at the instructional level. Many school personnel are becoming aware that many of the "declassified" students who have non-retarded performance in adaptive behavior continue to exhibit retarded academic functioning in the school environment. Many of these students may not "fit" in existing traditional classification systems for delivery of special services (i.e., these students do not appear to LLD, emotionally disturbed, or health impaired). This presents school personnel with the problem of attempting to provide a student with an appropriate education without the instructional services which are available through special education programs. Indeed, in some instances, not providing a student with a special program appears to be contrary to the current educational trends and legal guidelines which require that the student receive the "most appropriate instructional arrangement." Unfortunately, many of these students have significant educational handicaps which are not defined within traditional classification systems.

Some students who are declassified from the mentally retarded population will continue to qualify for special education services under other handicapping conditions. Declassifying a child as mentally retarded may lead to a more careful and thorough assessment of a student's educational handicaps, socialcultural, and family characteristics, and result in the identification of previously undetected emotional and/or health problems. In these instances, the adaptive and pluralistic assessments which declassified the student have provided the stimulus for personnel to refine their techniques for diagnosing a variety of handicaps. Further research is needed on a case by case basis to determine if other special education handicapping

conditions may exist within the "declassified" population of students.

CONTENT NOTES

[1]The ethnic composition of the district is 54% Anglo, 41% Mexican American, and 5% Black.

[2]The district's appraisal procedures require students who appear to have a history of severe retardation to be evaluated with the Stanford-Binet and the AAMD Adaptive Behavior Scale. These students were not included in the present study as this study deals with the impact of the ABIC (Mercer, 1973) on special education students.

[3]Students are evaluated in their primary home language as defined by the Texas Education Agency.

[4]In addition to these criteria, a medical assessment including vision and hearing evaluations is required.

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TABLE 1

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF CLASSIFICATION
OF MENTAL RETARDATION RESULTING
FROM FOUR APPROACHES

	EMR	TMR	Total MR
I.Q.			
N	85	25	110
Percent	77%	23%	100%
Psychometric			
N	69	13	82
Percent	63%	12%	75%
ELP			
N	46	17	63
Percent	42%	15%	57%
Adaptive			
N	25	8	33
Percent	23%	7%	30%

Total N = 110

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF STUDENTS DECLASSIFIED AS MENTALLY RETARDED FROM FOUR APPROACHES

	Not M-R
I.Q.	
N	0
Percent	---
Psychometric	
N	28
Percent	25%
ELP	
N	47
Percent	43%
Adaptive	
N	77
Percent	70%

Total N = 110

TABLE 3

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF CLASSIFICATION OF MENTAL RETARDATION RESULTING FROM FOUR APPROACHES FOR A TRIETHNIC POPULATION

	EMR A[a]	EMR MA[b]	EMR BL.[c]	TMR A	TMR MA	TMR BL.
I.Q.						
N[d]	15	60	10	5	17	3
Percent	75%	78%	77%	25%	22%	23%
Psychometric						
N	10	51	7	3	8	2
Percent	50%	66%	54%	15%	10%	15%
ELP						
N	8	36	3	3	11	1
Percent	40%	47%	23%	15%	14%	7%
Adaptive						
N	6	17	2	2	6	0
Percent	30%	22%	15%	10%	8%	0%

[a]Anglo Total N = 20
[b]Mexican-American N = 77
[c]Black Total N = 13
(Caution should be exercised in interpreting percentages on Black sample due to small N.)
[d]Total N N = 110

TABLE 4

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF STUDENTS DECLASSIFIED AS MENTALLY RETARDED RESULTING FROM FOUR APPROACHES FOR A TRIETHNIC POPULATION

		Not MR A	Not MR MA	Not MR BL.
I.Q.	N[d]	---	---	---
	Percent	---	---	---
Psychometric	N	7	18	4
	Percent	35%	24%	31%
ELP	N	7	30	9
	Percent	35%	39%	70%
Adaptive	N	12	54	11
	Percent	60%	70%	85%

[a]Anglo Total N = 20
[b]Mexican-American N = 77
[c]Black Total N = 13
(Caution should be exercised in interpreting percentages on Black sample due to small N.)
[d]Total N = 110

TABLE 5

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF CLASSIFICATION OF MENTAL RETARDATION RESULTING FROM FOUR APPROACHES FOR TWO SES GROUPS

	EMR Middle[a]	EMR Low[b]	TMR Middle	TMR Low
I.Q.				
N	13	72	7	18
Percent	65%	80%	35%	20%
Psychometric				
N	10	60	4	8
Percent	50%	67%	20%	9%
ELP				
N	9	38	7	8
Percent	45%	42%	35%	9%
Adaptive				
N	6	19	3	6
Percent	30%	21%	15%	7%

Middle SES Total N = 20

Low SES Total N = 90

Caution should be exercised in interpreting percentages calculated on the middle SES sample due to the small N.

Total N = 110

TABLE 6

FREQUENCY AND PERCENT OF CLASSIFICATION
OF STUDENTS DECLASSIFIED AS MENTAL RETARDED
RESULTING FROM FOUR APPROACHES FOR TWO SES GROUPS

	Not MR Middle	Not MR Low
I.Q.		
N	----	----
Percent	----	----
Psychometric		
N	6	22
Percent	30%	24%
ELP		
N	4	44
Percent	20%	49%
Adaptive		
N	11	65
Percent	55%	72%

Middle SES Total N = 20

Low SES Total N = 90

Caution Should be erercised in interpreting percentages calculated on the middle SES sample due to the small N.

Total N = 110